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These Are Not Robots

With a sold-out tour, an acclaimed art-house film, a live album and an upcoming film of their legendary live show, Daft Punk are more relevant than ever in ways even they never imagined.

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The beginning of 2006 should have marked the beginning of the end for Daft Punk. The duo's third album, *Human After All*, failed to match the critical or chart success of its predecessors. The dance world still held a place in its heart for the two Parisian robots, but even fans were indifferent to *Human's* brand of electro dance rock. Classics like "Around the World" and "One More Time" had rocketed Daft Punk into the mainstream subconscious (not to mention Gap ads), but that was years ago. Half a decade had passed without a huge hit, and it didn't look likely to happen again.

Two years later, the situation is entirely different. Not only do the French robots enjoy credit for a number one hit, thanks to Kanye West, but their live show has reinvigorated their careers. With a sold-out tour, an acclaimed art-house film, a live album and an upcoming film of their legendary live show, Daft Punk are more relevant than ever in ways even they never imagined.

Despite the length of their careers and their prominence, Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo and Thomas Bangalter, the men behind the masks, have managed to keep their private lives private. Naturally, speculation on what they look like has become a pop-culture mystery rivaling Kiss' make-up days. So let it be said that when they sit down with *Big Shot* on the set of their photo shoot, the robot helmets are off, and Bangalter and Homem-Christo are surprisingly candid about their music, their ambitions and even their personal lives. "We've known each other since we were 12," Bangalter mentions repeatedly to emphasize the closeness and sheer familial comfort these two feel around each other.

"When we work together, we are on the same wavelength," de Homem-Christo explains. "After all these years, it's natural for us to understand each other and to be complementary. We're on the same road, so it's easy." That road is, as Bangalter explains, full of "many extraordinary situations," from playing to 40,000 screaming fans to working with Hollywood royalty on

music videos.

Not only do they look like normal people underneath those very heavy (and expensive) Hedi Slimane-designed helmets, but they also seem to have regular lives, at least when they're not on the road. Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo is married and Thomas Bangalter has been with the same woman for years. Both are fathers (of a six year old and a one year old, respectively). Bangalter, the taller one who is usually in the silver and black helmet, is the more talkative of the two, while de Homem-Christo—usually in the gold helmet—is either indifferent or shy.

While they've known each other for more than two decades, it's been a little over one that the world has known them. Their 1997 debut, *Homework*, shot off several clubland favorites like "Around the World" and "Da Funk." Their 2001 follow-

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up, *Discovery*, set the bar even higher, cracking the Top 50 in the US and propelling the lead single, "One More Time," into endless worldwide rotation. A sextet of animated videos (culled from an anime film made as a video accompaniment to the album) cemented Daft Punk's individual anonymity, even as they became one of the few DJ acts to find success in a pop-drenched, post-electronica music market.

It seemed only logical that their third album, *Human After All*, would expand on their claim to global dance floor dominance. But even the use of "Technologic" in an iTunes commercial couldn't stave off newcomers like Diplo and LCD Soundsystem. Their once-groundbreaking sound suddenly seemed tired. When LCD released its breakthrough single, "Daft Punk Is Playing at My House," an ode to house parties, the Robots were elder statesmen worthy of respect, but of dubious relevance. For most electronic acts this would be the end of the story. But Daft Punk is not most electronic acts.

When the duo took the stage at Coachella in 2006, everything changed, not just for Daft Punk but for the entire music dance music scene. It was the kind of performance that, if you were there, you'll never forget it, and if you missed it, you'll never forgive yourself. After nine years of concert dormancy, the Robots emerged with an appropriate chant of "human/robot." By the time they dropped the unexpected mix of "Technologic" interpolated with Busta Rhymes' then-charting "Touch It" (which itself samples "Technologic"), the LCD screen behind the pyramid-shaped DJ booth lit up, and the stage filled with a massive triangle grid of neon lights. The audience was suddenly oblivious to the desert night heat and was bounding and bouncing, positively enlivened by the mix. For a full hour Daft Punk cruised through a mash-up set of their old hits with their newer songs, crossing years and BPMs within seconds.

The legend of the performance was bolstered by video clips posted on YouTube. The enthusiastic reception surprised even the performers. "A few shows into it, we realized there was an opportunity to take the show on a worldwide tour," Bangalter explains. "We hit a note that we wanted to express, and we thought it was essential to share it with audiences. Initially, we thought it would be four or five or six shows, and we just passed our 40th."

Inside their DJ pyramid, Bangalter and Homem-Christo operate remotes which connect to a custom-made sound system about 20 feet behind them. Intercoms in their helmets allow them to communicate with each other as their head gear limits vision, not to mention eye contact. "It's so dark, it takes a bit of practice standing up there," says de Homem-Christo.

Suddenly, without a platinum record or a new single, Daft Punk was selling out arenas across the country. Their fans were ravenous for these two DJs whose faces they'd never seen. But just because you're in a face-obscuring helmet and full-body robot costume, doesn't mean you can't emot. For robots, the Daft boys are remarkably expressive. They seem to enjoy and appreciate the accolades of their fans, and Bangalter practically vogues for the camera on this photo shoot. They have an understanding of the subtle humor, the sheer irony of it all.

It's this postmodern mystique that Daft Punk parlayed into the making of *Electroma*, a sci-fi-esque feature film that screens exclusively at festivals and midnight art-house theaters (sans *Rocky Horror*-type costumes in the audience...so



far). With so much happening with their music, the film's release was not only a surprise to fans, but another testament to the duo's endless creativity.

They were drawn to what Bangalter described as "the idea of expressing ourselves and playing with technology in different art forms. We've always loved film, and we were excited to experiment with it in the same way we had started to experiment with music."

Both the film and their tour stem from the robots' same creative mission: "We always encourage an interactive process with our fans," Bangalter explains. "Our show doesn't come with a users manual, and it's out of respect for the audience that we don't want our process to be a demonstrative one. It's much more interesting for people to draw

"As artists, we think the younger generation should come and destroy everything that we've done, and that doesn't seem to be the case. Some people are really respecting what we've done and keep [their work] in that vein, but we really tried to restart from scratch what the generation before us did."

their own conclusions. [After] ten years without touring, [the relationship] has been so abstract between the audience and ourselves." The movie, as distant as it is, is merely another opportunity to connect.

While the fans are undeniably won over by the live show, some aficionados have been less enthused. Given that the audio and visual components on stage were timed so precisely to match each other, questions began to come up about what exactly the robots were doing when they were on stage. Discussions on message boards and blogs ran rampant about whether or not it was even them onstage, let alone if they were playing.

"Electronic music is music made with machines and we are the operators of the machines," Bangalter says, defending their show without being offended by the critics. "What used to be a lot of drum machines and synthesizers and sequencers has now been substituted by computers. We operate the computers and the visual elements with remote controls."

This is not the first time Daft Punk has inspired controversy. A few years ago, some industrious fans "revealed" the original sources for most of DP's tracks on a blog.

In case you didn't know, even their most revered songs, like "Da Funk" and "Digital Love," borrow so heavily from old material by other artists, you could almost consider them remixes. The sampled material found its way onto a Daft Punk tribute album of sorts called *Discovered*, titled as if there was some sort of hoax at work.

In some fans' minds, the compilation might take away originality points from Bangalter and Homem-Christo, but they've been playing with the notion of originality from the beginning. What is electronic music, after all? And what is the musician? This is what a Daft Punk performance asks its audience. Perhaps the guys are so loyal to their mechanical personae because they question that it's people who are making music—let alone themselves—if music is

at all what Daft Punk makes.

Controversies notwithstanding, their live comeback couldn't have come at a better time for them or for the scene. In 2006, fellow French acts Justice and Kavinsky were about to break overseas while North American artists like MSTRKRFT and Chromeo were ready to explode, too. Somehow, the robots managed to change their peer group, from the practically adult-contemporary Air, Cassius, and Dimitri From Paris, to the most cutting edge and youth-oriented clique that had crossed over from the DJ booth yet.

"We see the new generation, and we are flattered by what they can take from ourselves," offers Bangalter. "But as artists, we think the younger generation should come and destroy everything that we've done, and that doesn't seem to be the case. Some people are really respecting what we've done and keep [their work] in that vein, but we really tried to restart from scratch what the generation before us did."

"I don't think that there is the most fertile ground right now to experiment," he continues. "It feels less experimental right now than it did ten years ago. That doesn't take away the quality of it. But in a way, rock and electronic music today is a genre that's coded in a much more established way.

How we got in ourselves was about trying to push the envelope and the limits of a frontier."

"In a way it's more open now, so they can just have fun and create music without restriction," adds de Homem-Christo. "But maybe we prefer to have something to go against."

Ten years ago it would have been implausible for one of hip-hop's biggest stars to not only sample a song from Daft Punk, but to feature them in his video. Of course, Kanye West prides himself in his rule-breaking as much as these robots do, and when he slowed down the refrain of "Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger" to act as the backbone for his track "Stronger," it took Daft Punk to a new audience yet again.

"He sent us a demo, and it was great because he was really using part of our music to fit in his own personal universe," Bangalter explains.

For Daft Punk, their role in the success of "Stronger" is part of their musical journey. "We're happy about the cycling and recycling; the ability to take references from popular culture and re-inject into popular culture. It's like a relay of things," Bangalter describes. "It's with a lot of respect for art and music that we sample and create things, and it's with a lot of enthusiasm that we are sampled ourselves. The whole thing is about trying to bring something new to this artistic game. It's essentially fun and very unlikely and very surprising."

With all this success, it might be time for a Gene Simmons-style revelation of their faces, right?

"No, but at the same time the evolution of our appearance is an on-going process," says Bangalter. "We thought about it, but [this tour] is the first time we are performing as robots. One of the concepts behind this show was to make the relationship between the audience less spiritual and more real."

"Real" between the listener and the sound, the viewer and the show, because there couldn't be anything less real about two robots in a light pyramid playing dance music. Like the rest of the Daft Punk package, their adherence to their own ethos is intertwined with '90s irony and a 21st century layer of denial.

With more live shows ahead, Daft Punk is still plotting their next move, even as they've been caught off guard by this wave of success. According to Bangalter, "We've been fortunate to go through all these waves. Everything is a surprise, so anything can happen."



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